

The science of fighting terrorism: the relation between terrorist actor type and counterterrorism effectiveness (web summary)

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While terrorism has been a major policy concern as well as a prominent research topic for over a decade now, we still know surprisingly little about counterterrorism effectiveness. This is certainly not because of a lack of research on terrorism and counterterrorism, as much ink has been spilt on, for instance, the definition of terrorism and the legal and ethical dilemmas associated with the adoption of counterterrorist legislation. The simple but crucial question ‘what works?’, however, has attracted considerably less attention. Moreover, the few studies that do address counterterrorism effectiveness do so in a rather crude manner, measuring counterterrorism effectiveness on the basis of such questionable indicators as the numbers of attacks and the number of victims. The PhD dissertation *The science of fighting terrorism* is an attempt to address these flaws, and is intended as a first step towards a more thorough understanding of counterterrorism effectiveness.

When generalising about the effectiveness of policy measures, the question is not so much whether they work, but rather under what circumstances they work. Hence, the goal of *The science of fighting terrorism* is to examine whether the effectiveness of counterterrorism measures depends on one particularly relevant circumstance: the nature of the terrorist threat.

The basis of the research underlying *The science of fighting terrorism* is a list of ten strategic-level counterterrorism measures, each with an indicator of effectiveness. The list includes repressive measures like intelligence gathering and law enforcement crackdowns as well as ‘softer’ measures like addressing the root causes of the terrorist threat and offering social reintegration programmes to lure terrorists out of their organisations or movements. The actual research consisted of the application of the list on three clusters of two similar terrorist organisations or movements, meaning that it has been examined for each of the six cases whether the counterterrorism measures were applied and, if so, whether they had the desired effect. If there is indeed a relation between counterterrorism effectiveness and the nature of a terrorist actor, the counterterrorism measures on the list will have similar effects on groups or movements in the same cluster. The three clusters were the following:

- *Revolutionary terrorism*: the RAF and the Weather Underground
- *Nationalist terrorism*: ETA and the Provisional IRA
- *Jihadist terrorism*: the jihadist movements in the Netherlands and the UK

The legendary military strategist Carl von Clausewitz held that “war is the realm of coincidence”. Understanding war this way, he had little faith in preconceived notions about how military campaigns should be waged on the strategic level. Instead, he believed that, given the wide variety of actors and developments that determine the course of a war, a military commander has no choice but to go by his intuition to overcome the chaos of the battlefield. While Von Clausewitz did acknowledge the value of science in some respects, his

work has given rise to the perception of warfare as an art rather than a science. Should we view counterterrorism this way as well, or are there regularities that we can resort to when formulating counterterrorism strategies?

There are certainly some similarities between the outcomes of the measures applied to the two movements in the jihadist cluster. Lacking a strong support base, both movements were severely weakened by policing and intelligence work, as they were unable to replace members that were arrested or expelled from the country. Also, both cases show that the risk of escalation as a result of repressive measures does not always apply. It is often held – not without reason, as we will see below – that poorly targeted repression, meaning the use of force against people other than the terrorists, will enrage a terrorist group's sympathisers, who will respond by stepping up their support to the terrorist group. While this may be true for terrorist actors with more active support bases, the jihadist movements in the Netherlands and the UK failed to gain strength from the arrests of innocent suspects and other instances where the police displayed a clear bias towards targeting Muslim communities.

The cases of ETA and the Provisional IRA, both of which had considerable organisational clout and popular support, show some similarities as well. Policing and intelligence did not eliminate either of the two organisations, but nevertheless played a crucial role in bringing about the cessation of both violent campaigns. The Spanish and British governments subjected ETA and the Provisional IRA to a series of operational defeats while at the same time refusing to give in to terrorist demands. Eventually, this made members of both groups decide that there was no point in carrying on the armed struggle. At the same time though, both cases also show that poorly targeted repression can exacerbate the problem. In the early stages of their campaign, mass arrests, curfews and violent house searches by the security forces won both ETA and the Provisional IRA much popular support and large numbers of new recruits.

The similarities in the cases of the RAF and the Weather Underground are less striking, but not entirely absent. Both cases demonstrate that policing in counterterrorism is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the two cases show that policing can lead to strategic success even in the absence of operational success. The American and German police never managed to eliminate the organisations as such, but they did manage to divert the two organisations from their political goals. The RAF responded to the law enforcement pressure by fighting for its own survival rather than for the overthrow of capitalism, and the Weather Underground had to put so much effort into avoiding arrests that they had no time left to connect with their constituency. Being forced to focus on mere survival, neither group was able to gain any political success, even though both were still able to commit a small attack every once in a while. On the other hand, much like the cases of ETA and the Provisional IRA, the cases of the RAF and the Weather Underground also underscore the risk of escalation due to poorly targeted repression. Both groups consisted of and were supported by members of the student movement who became radicalised after being brutalised or harassed by the police. As the confrontations between the student movement and the police became less frequent, however, the Weather Underground and the RAF were deprived of an important propaganda and recruitment tool and became more isolated as a result.

Given the similarities that have been found in the three clusters, there is reason to believe that counterterrorism is not a Clausewitzian 'realm of coincidence'. Nevertheless, a note of caution is appropriate. For some measures the relation between effectiveness and the nature of the terrorist actors was less clear-cut than for the ones that have been discussed in the previous

paragraphs. For some measures there appeared to be no relation between their effects and the terrorist actor type, and other measures were applied in only one or two cases, which made it difficult to establish any relation at all. This means that further research is necessary, because only when the six case studies in *The science of fighting terrorism* have been followed up and a more substantial body of empirically-based literature has been accumulated, will we truly be able to treat counterterrorism as a science.